

# Predictive models for understanding body dissatisfaction among young males and females in China

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## Abstract

The present study was designed to develop predictive models for understanding body dissatisfaction among young males and females ( $N = 1377$ ) in China. Six factors were assessed, including body mass index (BMI), perception of teasing, social pressure to be thin, appearance comparison, thin-ideal internalization and perceived social support. Variables were examined respectively for males and females. One SEM model, which had good fit indices, was developed for each gender. For both genders, BMI exerted its influence on body image directly and indirectly through perception of teasing. Two sources of sociocultural influence, perception of teasing and social pressure to be thin, also directly predicted body dissatisfaction. Gender differences were found in the relation between mediational mechanisms (social comparison and thin-ideal internalization) and body dissatisfaction. For females but not males, social comparison and internalization acted as weak but significant mediators between sociocultural influence and body image concerns. Implications and limitations are discussed.

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## Introduction

A wide-ranging review of research literature suggests that dissatisfaction with body size and shape is a common concern for adolescents and young adults. Approximately, 60% of females and 30% of males report a desire to change their body size or shape (Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2001) and nearly 25% of adolescent females report clinically significant levels of body dissatisfaction (Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Body dissatisfaction is associated with emotional distress, low sense of self-value and eating disorders (Chen et

*Abbreviations:* BMI, body mass index; PTS, Perception of Teasing Scale; PSPS, Perceived Sociocultural Pressure Scale; PACS, Physical Appearance Comparison Scale; INT, Ideal-Body Stereotype Scale-Revised; MSPSS, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; NPS-F, Negative Physical Self-Scale-Fitness Scale

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al., 2006; Hoffman & Brownell, 1997; Stice & Whitenton, 2002). Many factors have been implicated in the onset and maintenance of body image problems, including biological factors (e.g., body mass index), psychological factors (e.g., perfectionism, negative affect, low self-esteem) and sociocultural factors (e.g., family, peer, romantic partner and media) (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003). Moreover, predictive models for the onset and maintenance of body image disturbance or eating problems have been developed and tested during the last decade, emphasizing the influence of sociocultural factors (Keery, van den Berg, & Thompson, 2004; Muris, Meesters, Blom, & Mayer, 2005; Ricciardelli, McCabe, Holt, & Finemore, 2003; Stice, 2001).

In an attempt to incorporate many of the variables hypothesized to have an effect on body dissatisfaction and eating disturbances, Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, and Tantleff-Dunn (1999) developed the Tripartite Influence Model. With respect to body dissatisfaction, an attempt was made to use a measure that captured specific facets of dissatisfaction with body size and weight (specific body sites such as the waist, thighs, and hips), along with a measure that assessed more global appearance evaluations (Keery et al., 2004). Eating disturbance was measured on the basis of drive for thinness (restricting tendencies, desire to lose weight, fear of weight gain) and bulimia symptoms (the tendency toward overeating, binging, and the impulse to engage in self-induced vomiting). The model is composed of three primary sources of sociocultural influence (peers, parents and media) that are hypothesized to exert their effects on body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance directly and indirectly through two primarily mediational mechanisms—appearance social comparison and thin-ideal internalization. Also body dissatisfaction is hypothesized to have a direct effect on restrictive eating, which may predict bulimic behaviors. This model has been tested to have good fit in adolescent girls and college women (Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Thompson et al., 1999; van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002), and has recently been used as a framework for understanding factors that might influence boys' body image concerns and steroid use (Smolak, Murnen, & Thompson, 2005).

Based on the Tripartite Influence Model (Keery, Berg, & Thompson, 2004), the current study aimed to develop a sociocultural model for predicting onset of body dissatisfaction in China. A brief review of the relevant variables is considered below.

### *Body mass index*

One of the main determinants of body dissatisfaction, dieting, and other aspects of problem eating among adolescents is BMI (Stice, 2002). Researchers have shown that both boys and girls who have a larger BMI reported a desire to be thinner (e.g., Candy & Fee, 1998; Chen et al., 2006; Ricciardelli et al., 2003). Increased BMI is associated with related constructs, such as body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, lower self-worth, concerns about being or becoming overweight, and dieting (Oliver & Thelen, 1996; Vander Wal & Thelen, 2000). However, few studies have considered the relationship between BMI and sociocultural variables when constructing predictive models of body dissatisfaction.

### *Perception of teasing from others*

With regard to the effect of the sociocultural variables, perception of teasing from others has been found to predict body dissatisfaction, body image disturbance and eating problems (Keery et al., 2004; Ricciardelli & McCabe, 2004; Vincent & McCabe, 2000). Although teasing can be benign, it typically constitutes a very negative experience for adolescents and young adults, and appearance is the most likely target (Wander Wal & Thelen, 2000). Longitudinal studies (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Thompson, Cattarin, Fowler, & Fisher, 1995; Thompson, Coovert, Richards, Johnson, & Cattarin, 1995) have shown that both perception of teasing frequency and impact are associated with the development of body dissatisfaction among middle-school girls. Hence, perception of teasing from others is likely associated with body dissatisfaction in adolescents as well as young adults for both males and females. Moreover, because heavier adolescents may be more likely to receive appearance-related teasing (Cattarin & Thompson, 1994; Thompson, Cattarin et al., 1995; Thompson, Coovert et al., 1995), teasing may serve as a mediator or moderator between BMI and body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, there has been little research on the relationship between perception of teasing and body dissatisfaction among males.

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